

A TRIBUTE TO RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (1872-1958) GUSTAV HOLST (1874-1934) AND PERCY SCHOLES (1877-1958)

Ralph Vaughan Williams, one of the few great masters of music of our age was 85 years of age when he died in August this year, and with the completion of this most active life, all those who have been enlivened and elevated by his work will feel both a sense of gratitude and of personal loss.

For the African Music Society, his compositions so broadly based upon intimate knowledge and love of his English folk music, must continue to be an inspiration and a challenge.

What Vaughan Williams achieved with a foundation of English folk music is an indication of what could be done equally well one day by some gifted African composer with his own; not, of course, in similar manner but with similar intent.

There may not yet be a theme by some Bantu Thomas Tallis awaiting development. There may never be an African 'Lark Ascending', but the sense of continuity so well demonstrated in everything composed by Vaughan Williams remains an ideal example of what can be achieved by a genius who had 'his roots firmly planted in his own soil'. as he himself once wrote, and 'gained the whole world without losing his own soul'.

I met R.V.W., as he was so frequently referred to by his intimates, on three occasions. The first was in 1931, together with his close friend Gustav Holst. During the conversation, I had asked them what they thought about the necessity of finding a suitable notation for African music. Turning to Holst with a smile, he said "We both have found how inadequate any system of notation can be to convey the sense of our music as we conceive it. No," he said, "do not worry yourself about notations at this stage . . . they will come in good time. Understanding must come first."

Both he and Holst agreed that the Tonic Sol-Fa system should be avoided and they encouraged me to record as much African music and song as possible, in such a way that the authenticity of the music could be established and judgement upon its structure and qualities could be left to the future.

Holst, I found, was particularly aware of the difficulties involved in defining the integrities of a folk music, and especially one which had been partly diverted by foreign styles of music. His own work with Vaughan Williams had succeeded in breaking the ties which during the nineteenth century, had bound English music to German and Italian, thus creating an independent English nationalism which found inspiration in its own past and in consequence gave back to English music a universal status.

A few years later, Percy Scholes, the author of the Oxford Companion to Music, that constant source of information, humour and perspective on musical matters, enlarged upon this nationalist theme. On the several occasions on which we met, both in South Africa and at his Oxford home as well as in correspondence, he insisted that a western approach to African music, while providing a certain yardstick for comparative studies by foreign students should never be allowed to overshadow the African verities which must eventually create their own musical standards.

These three giants of the English musical world, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst and Percy Scholes, all of them now gone, Holst in 1934 and the other two this year, have in large measure provided continual inspiration and personal encouragement to my own work and in the evaluation of the collection of folk music of this Continent as a significant revelation of the character, prides and pleasures of African peoples everywhere.

The lives of all three as composers and writers may seem to have their settings far removed from Africa and its distinctive folk music styles. Yet a common element which made them great, and is equally important for Africa, was a clear and practical understanding of the true position of folk musics in the whole gamut of musical practice.

The following lines which were written some years ago about Ralph Vaughan Williams might well be applied to his two contemporaries also insofar as their attitude to national music was concerned . . .

“His art, being rooted in tradition, has had the strength to be progressive. His music . . . has arisen out of the life of the community and the spirit of the time to which he belongs, and as is the way of art so begotten and so nourished, it reveals the abiding and the essential in the local and the temporary—which is the way of the prophets throughout history.”

HUGH TRACEY.

INTERNATIONAL FOLK MUSIC COUNCIL

The Honorary Secretary of the Society attended the Tenth Meeting of the General Assembly of the International Folk Music Council in Liège, Belgium, from July 28th to August 2nd, 1958.

A great deal of interesting matter was discussed although most of the attention of the Council was, naturally, directed towards the many Folk Musics of Europe. There were, however, several Members present whose interests were primarily African, including:—

Dr. K. P. Wachsmann	(Uganda)
Mr. J. H. Nketia	(Ghana)
Mons. Jean-Noel Maquet	(Congo)
Dr. Alan Merriam	(United States of America)
The Rev. Tom Nabeta	(Uganda)
Mr. David Rycroft	(South Africa)
Prof. William Bascom	(United States of America)
Mr. Andrew Tracey	(South Africa)

and others.

Recorded music collected by the International Library of African Music was played in open session together with a film showing the construction of Chopi xylophones and the dances which are accompanied by these instruments.

Discussions on African music led to the following statement which was proposed by the Honorary Secretary, Mr. Hugh Tracey, and seconded by Dr. A. A. Bake:—

That this Conference, being agreed upon the great social usefulness and musical virtue of the many indigenous folk musics of Africa, urges upon each of the territorial governments concerned, as well as upon educational and religious institutions, philanthropic foundations, radio corporations and others, consideration of the following suggestions in the academic and practical fields, while there is yet time to take effective action.

A) ACADEMIC

The provision throughout each territory of facilities for a folk music survey as well as studies of specific subjects connected with music to be undertaken by persons of approved qualifications with the support of the appropriate faculties of recognized universities.

(B) PRACTICAL LOCAL ACTION

- (i) Co-operation in the phonographic recording, pressing and publishing of as wide a selection as possible of authentic indigenous songs and instrumental music.
- (ii) Ensuring the distribution of a minimum number of discs for use in educational centres, archives and museums.
- (iii) Establishing centres of folk music study within each territory where especially gifted folk musicians can participate according to their ability; and providing personnel, apparatus and finance to maintain their activities in two directions: in the collection, study and classification of material; and in the immediate application of such material to practical ends, e.g.:
 - (a) publication of text books for education;
 - (b) recreation, including broadcasting;
 - (c) special anthropological studies.